

# A (socially isolated) room of one's own: women writing lockdown.

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**‘A [Socially Isolated] Room of One’s Own: Women Writing Lockdown’ – Lucie Armitt,**

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I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in... (Woolf 1989, 24)

A century ago, Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own*, a book she self-defines as a ‘treatise’ on the history of women and fiction, in which she examines why the tradition of English Literature has failed to permit women writers equal access to publication, longevity of publication, or writerly significance. Unwittingly, however, it also exists as a testimony to women’s unequal relationship to space, public and private, a lack of equality with significant implications, in historical terms, for women’s sense of social identity. Between March and June 2020, in the face of the COVID pandemic, a UK Government directive to ‘stay at home... save lives’ (GovUKb, 2020) became the first phase of what we now call ‘lockdown’. That directive was not explicitly gendered, but what emerged very quickly in response to the insistence that all UK citizens must ‘stay at home’, was the realisation that this first lockdown phase was affecting men and women differently.

As Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Louise Isham observe, that notion of saving lives by staying at home became paradoxical for women. Citing a BBC news source, they observe that ‘Refuge, one of the leading domestic abuse organisations, reported that calls to the UK Domestic Violence Helpline increased by 25% in the seven days following the announcement of tighter social distancing and lockdown measures’ and that ‘During the same period, there was a 150% increase in visits to the Refuge website’ (Kelly and Morgan, 2020; cited in Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020, 2047). An ITV news report records a doubling of domestic abuse killings during the first three lockdown weeks (ITV, 2020), while a *Guardian*

article, under the heading 'Economic Fallout from Pandemic Will Hit Women Hardest', reported in July 2020 that 'mothers are one and a half times more likely than fathers to have either lost their job or quit since lockdown began' (Partington, 2020).

The extraordinary circumstances of lockdown were recognised as 'unprecedented in peacetime' in a series of Government statements and newspaper articles that drew analogies with being 'at war' and having to 'fight.' (GOVUK 2020; Swinford et al, 2020). Yet, while Government continued to draw military parallels and the Queen evoked Vera Lynn assuring the nation 'we will meet again', other parallels with wartime were less noticed. The transformation of the home from a private space into something different had echoes of World War I, when national food shortages persuaded David Lloyd George to appoint a number of women advisors to the Ministry of Food, recognising that male politicians lacked the necessary knowledge to offer practical advice to housewives. This initiative prompted the concept of the Home Front, more usually associated with World War II. Recent individual autobiographical responses to lockdown had their own echo in the Mass-Observation, the social research project begun in 1937, whose archive continues to offer 'an amazingly rich source' to historians (Summerfield 1985, 451). Dorothy Sheridan, Mass-Observation's archivist for several decades, drew particular attention to its importance as 'one of those archives which holds material not only *about* women but also *by* women about their lives' (Sheridan, 1994, 101). Although begun before the war, it was the outbreak of hostilities that brought the project into 'its own sort of own' in the words of founder Tom Harrison (Jeffrey, 1999), making it the first port of call for historians concerned with the social rather than the military history of war.

Lockdown once again transformed the usually private space of the home into something quite different. Homes were now expected to function as hybrid schools, nurseries, working-from-home offices (often involving hot-desking by workers in different professions or industries) and sites for virtual socialising, women often moving online to find the space to write or think. Lockdown saw a renaissance of online journaling, as many sought to document their engagement in what they perceived to be historic. Such blogs could provide the space to contemplate, vent or despair as required, with the bonus of responses from readers commenting to share their own experiences or offer sympathy. Nevertheless, the commitment to continuous updates and critical comments meant that, for some, writing and posting lockdown diaries became both ‘an ordeal and an accomplishment’, with viral fame leading to personal attacks (Yang 2021).

Discussion forums on sites such as Netmums and Mumsnet also offered women the (virtual) space to vent worry, despair, anger and frustration safely and anonymously. Both sites act as online “third spaces” in which women can meet and interact informally, and where political talk, organizing and action can occur (Graham et al, 2016). Such women-dominated discussion sites are still rare online and provide places where women’s writing and voices are not simply allowed, but the norm. Significantly, while men’s online networks experienced shrinkage during the pandemic, women’s did not (Palmer 2021), demonstrating women’s need to have a virtual as well as physical space of their own in crowded lockdown homes. Both UK-based sites offer the opportunity for women to act as a collective force and have campaigned on issues such as the gender pay gap, better miscarriage care and sexual violence over the years. During lockdown, the sites gave women a space to voice concerns about the lack of guidance on vaccines for pregnant women, access to medical abortion

during lockdown and the impact of lockdown on gender relations within the home (Mumsnet HQ, 2021).

The value of such sources was acknowledged from the start of lockdown. Plenty of projects emerged soliciting the work of online diarists. Bristol Museums encouraged: ‘One day, insights into this time during the Coronavirus pandemic will be really useful to historians so we’d love to hear from you if you can help (Druce 2020). Blogger ‘Kids of the Wild’ encouraged her readers, ‘These are historic days we are living through and we should definitely record the time for posterity’. She recommended working with our children to make a time capsule, which might include a newspaper, letter from a grandparent, a copy of a Government letter about the pandemic, and a letter to their future selves about their experiences (Kids of the Wild, 2020). *PM*, BBC Radio 4’s flagship evening news programme, solicited ‘Covid Chronicles’, between 18 March 2020 and 31 March 2021. Over 1,800 listeners contributed 400 words on their daily lives including many descriptions of living in lockdown. A number of these have subsequently been archived, along with the recordings of those that were broadcast, at the British Library.

Our eighteen-month project, ‘A [Socially Isolated] Room of One’s Own: Women Writing Lockdown’, is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It involves collecting, capturing, archiving, and evaluating a variety of written responses by women about that first lockdown phase, irrespective of whether or not those women self-define as writers. The final main output will be a virtual exhibition, ‘The Lockdown House’, to be launched in June 2023, which will showcase many of these original responses. All forms of writing are eligible for inclusion: published fiction and poetry, song lyrics, newspaper articles, social media posts, scrapbook and diary entries. In effect, we are mitigating against

the ephemerality of women's early responses to lockdown, such ephemerality being one of the problems that both Woolf and historians have associated especially with women's writing. As Deborah Withers observes, in her article on how the digital age can mitigate against the historic ephemerality of women's work, 'history does not and has not always happened in the same way for everyone' (Withers 2017, 681), including, of course, all women.

In many cases, the writings we are collecting reflect women's private and professional lives, but others capture instances of heavy-handed treatment by authority figures, as was reported in *The Daily Mirror* in April 2020. The article reports that a woman sitting alone on a park bench was told to leave by a Metropolitan Police Officer. As part of the UK Government directive permitted citizens to exercise outside for an hour daily, the woman refused, explaining that she was 'exercising her mind'. The incident revolved around their differential understandings of the word 'exercise', the police officer adding that 'his interpretation is that the exercise needs to be physical', in response to which the woman quite reasonably replies 'But that is your interpretation, that's not what the law says'. Unfortunately for the woman, her resistance provides the police officer with grounds for her arrest (Hall and Jolly, 2020).

In the first six months of this project, we have been struck by how closely the material covered by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* a century ago has resonated anew with responses to that first lockdown phase. The incident of the woman in the park resonates closely with one in which Woolf's unnamed protagonist, strolling around the grounds of an equally unnamed 'Oxbridge' College, 'lost in thought,' finds herself the subject of an unforeseen hostile encounter with a Beadle, who similarly objects to her solitary presence:

I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. (Woolf 1989, 7-8)

Unlike the woman in the park, Woolf's protagonist accedes to the Beadle's request and thereby diffuses the situation: 'As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done'. However, that notion of harm once more revolves around the distinction between mental and physical exercise. Certainly, no physical harm is done, but the woman's mental equilibrium is certainly impaired, for she tells us that 'What idea it had been that had sent me audaciously trespassing I could not now remember' (Woolf 1989, 8).

Alongside its spatial observations and their consequences, *A Room of One's Own* tackles the subject of the archive, or more accurately its gaps. Considering that absence of women from history, Woolf muses that 'presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it' (Woolf 1989, 44). The attention to soliciting and preserving accounts of lockdown, from the very local level through to institutions such as the British Library and the BBC, has resulted in an unprecedented amount of material for contemporary historians, much of which has been produced by and about women. Please do contribute

your stories and accounts of lockdown to the project, by contacting our website at

<https://womenwritinglockdown.co.uk/> Please also follow us on social media at:

<https://twitter.com/WomenLockdown>

<https://www.facebook.com/Womenwritinglockdown>

<https://www.instagram.com/womenwritinglockdown/>

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